

Some Regimented Evening

The Relationship between Commentary and Representation in “The Dead” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

HELEN PINSENT

As a verb, “worry” has roots in Old English and refers to one person trying to hurt another (choking, harassing, irritating). In the nineteenth century, according to the *OED*, it changed: it became a noun that referred to an anxious state of mind, a sense of dread tied to interior fretting rather than external threat. Eliot’s Prufrock and Joyce’s Gabriel are, as Helen Pinsent shows, defined by this distinctly modern and modernist worry. Moreover, it cannot be escaped through fantasy even as worry isolates these two protagonists from their social worlds by drawing them inward into repetition, reflection, and regret. Trapped in what Francis O’Gorman has dubbed “worry’s familiar grooves,” the iteration of the underwhelming overwhelms them, on terms that, as Pinsent argues, are both distinctly modernist and distinguishable from each other.

—Julia Wright

Modernism is characterized thematically by feelings of malaise and social alienation, and structurally by what Sean Latham calls “the rejection of realist codes of representation”

(775). Francis O’Gorman explains that this co-development is not coincidental: “Recognition of worry’s nature slowly became bound up with a sense of the distinctiveness of life in the new century, and the tools that were available to describe what it felt like” (1003). Modernism’s symbols

SOME REGIMENTED EVENING

and allusions, therefore, became “tools” used to underscore the artistic theme of alienation and “worry.” Joyce’s “The Dead” and Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” are two examples of this technique: each work’s protagonist is plagued by feelings of inadequacy and angst, and each piece reveals these feelings by allowing access to the mind of the man experiencing them. This process not only frees the works from the burden of strict realism, but also makes room for commentary on the conditions they depict without the necessity of overt rhetoric. In the case of these two pieces, the commentary is the same – both “The Dead” and “Prufrock” depict the worry of their respective protagonists as a way of decrying social conventions’ oppressive and alienating tendencies, under the guise of fictional representation.

The process of depicting each character’s feelings of angst or alienation begins with describing the world as he sees it. Therefore, the words a piece employs to describe the world also give shape to the anxiety felt by the person perceiving it. O’Gorman writes: “Words are not exactly symbols of worry, metaphors, or quite its images – they are essential to its substance as a dialogue/monologue in the head” (1006). In “The Dead,” as long as the narration is focalized through Gabriel, the text uses military jargon and imagery to describe his surroundings at the party. His aunt prepares to sing, accompanied by “an irregular musketry of applause” (2293). Dinner is set and described like a battle diagram – with two different meats positioned at “rival ends” of the table, flanked by “parallel lines of side-dishes,” and bottles of alcohol positioned as “sentries” in

“squads [...] drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms” (2295). As the meal progresses, Gabriel’s inner monologue describes the “confusion” of events as being full of “the noise of orders and counter-orders” (2296). This sequence of images pits Gabriel against his dinner companions in a war of etiquette and erudition. Worse, Gabriel is inconsolably convinced that “[h]e would fail with them” because of “his superior education” (2285). As L. J. Morrissey states: “[H]e feels superior [...] yet he feels inadequate before them” (22). In this way, “The Dead” laments the rigorous social conventions that turn a social gathering into something to be conquered, and that higher learning may make enemies of one’s friends and family.

In “Prufrock,” the source of the speaker’s worry is similar to Gabriel’s; however, instead of viewing “the taking of a toast and tea” (34) as a war, Prufrock fears that the society into which he longs to be admitted is completely inaccessible to him. This anxiety is voiced in a series of images of impermeability. The panorama of the sunset is compared to “a patient etherized upon a table” (3): rather than invoking imagery of sleep on a comfortable mattress, Eliot depicts a patient disconnected from both the conscious world and the cold surface on which he lies. The noticeable feature of the “sawdust restaurants” he passes is not the food, but “oyster shells” (7). Even the “yellow fog” (15), famous for its ability to penetrate into any space, only “Curled once about the house, and fell asleep” (22). Prufrock himself remains – physically, or at least, emotionally – outside the party, as “[i]n the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (13–14).

SOME REGIMENTED EVENING

He imagines how his advanced age and his inadequacies of education and sophistication will expose themselves. As Nathan A. Cervo explains: "Prufrock lives out his life as a long process of 'meticulous' [...] conformity to the rituals of worldly sophistication [...] always risking absurdity, jauntily treading the brink" (208). By describing Prufrock's pain and employing a sympathetic voice within the text, "Prufrock" comments on social constraints that reinforce isolation according to age and class.

Along with subjective descriptions of what *is*, both "The Dead" and "Prufrock" express the angst of their protagonists by peppering their thoughts with unanswered and unanswerable questions about what *might be*. According to O'Gorman, "[t]he intrusiveness of questions that will not be answered marks worry's familiar grooves" (1013). One of the notable focuses of Gabriel's questions in "The Dead" is his exchange with Miss Ivors. Gabriel wonders if he has been too blunt with her, if "he ought not to have answered her like that" (2292), and then questions himself about the sincerity of her politeness in excusing herself early: "Gabriel asked himself was he the cause of her abrupt departure" (2295). All of his questions of propriety come after his actions, indicating a persistent self-doubt. His questions are forever unanswerable though, because he never actually poses them to anyone but himself. By opting for questions over answers throughout the text, "The Dead" itself raises the issue of whether rules of politeness in conversation interfere with sincerity of expression. The absence of sincerity in Gabriel's life turns doubt into crisis as "[h]is own identity

[...] fad[es] out into a grey impalpable world" (2310), and the imagery of "snow falling faintly [...] upon *all* the living and the dead" suggests that Gabriel's fate is no different from any other's (2311, my emphasis).

In contrast to Gabriel's doubt over past actions, Prufrock is plagued by questions that threaten his ability to act at all:

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" [...] located the self-conscious individual in middle-class society. And recurrent questions - the circling repeats of "'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'" (p. 4) - were part of that, as if the shapes of subterranean worry, of iterative anxiety, were bound up with a sensitive mind that was contemplating breaking from cycles it could not break. (O'Gorman 1012)

The idea that to engage in social interaction poses a risk of some kind, or that to converse would be to "presume" (54, 61, 68) indicates an apprehension rivaled only by Prufrock's questions of "Would it have been worth it, after all" (87, 99) - that is, to have solved the great mysteries of "the universe" (92), or to have borne his whole soul "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen" (105) - if the response would be "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all" (109-10). Here, Prufrock's questions are unanswerable, not because they are unuttered, but because the feared possibilities prevent Prufrock from acting to answer them. His anxiety keeps him from "presuming." Thus, "Prufrock" constructs a critique of the paralyzing effect of exclusionary standards of conduct and erudition on middle-class men and women

by depicting the frustrated hopes of one man who is unable to display the sophistication he possesses.

Both Gabriel and Prufrock try to escape the paralyzing pressures of social interaction by engaging in fantasy, but the shapes their respective fantasies take are very different. In "Prufrock," because his fears stem from worry over the outcome of actions he has not yet taken, the man fantasizes about possible successes, about "a hundred visions and revisions" (33). His fantasies are never really satisfying, however, because each one, though it may begin promisingly, with "hear[ing] the mermaids singing" (124) and "linger[ing] [with them] in the chambers of the sea" (129), the perceived inevitable conclusion corrupts the fantasy - "human voices wake us and we drown" (131). As Cervo states, "Prufrock drowns recurrently in humiliation, in the mortification of knowing that he is only a dressed-up mannequin" (208). For Prufrock, fantasy is broken by his imagination's inability to create a scenario in which he excels in a social situation. Whether his inadequacies are themselves real, or simply a collection of fantasies more plausible for him, they win out over his escape into imagined popularity. "Prufrock," therefore, both illustrates and laments anxiety's reinforcement of the specious standards by which people are often judged.

Gabriel's fantasies in "The Dead" serve a different purpose. For the man, they provide an escape into a world very different from the tense and flawed one he is occupying at the party. For example, when faced with an awkward conversation with Mrs. Malins (2292), or when anticipating a nerve-wracking toast (2298), Gabriel retreats

into imagining the beauty of the snow, and wishing he were outside enjoying it:

How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!
(2292)

Gabriel uses these reveries to calm himself before heading back into the fray of studied niceties and careful scrutiny. For "The Dead" as a whole, Gabriel's fantastical constructions serve another function: the snow blankets the town the same way that rules of civility gloss over potentially serious problems. As Morrissey denotes: "Joyce sets up the inner/outer contrast simply by putting these reveries in the context of this genteel Dublin party where [various blunders and differences of opinion] are covered over by euphemism, sentiment, and trivia" (24). The fact that Gabriel seeks out these "reveries," and is not deterred from them even upon leaving the party and trudging through snow that is actually "slushy underfoot" and "only [in] streaks and patches [...] on the roofs" (2304), suggests that he, rather than wishing for greater sincerity from guests at such events, wishes that the party personae were real. As opposed to Prufrock's insistence on the reality of his perceived failings, Gabriel clings to an impossible fantasy, akin to the "Christmas cards from Freddy Malins' shop" (Morrissey 25). Both "The Dead" and "Prufrock" as works, however, do not support these fantasies, rewarding their respective protagonists with a

SOME REGIMENTED EVENING

“dissolving and dwindling” (Joyce 2310) reality and “drown[ing]” (Eliot 131).

The challenge of exploring the encompassing world of worry is daunting. O’Gorman writes, “[i]ts pain cannot be easily transmuted by art into pleasure. Art must work hard to make space for worry at all” (1005). In order to accomplish this bold design, “The Dead” and “Prufrock” offer a glimpse into the minds that experience these thoughts, and try to “integrate [worry] into acts of human moral choice and vision” (O’Gorman 1001). In this way, the departure from pure realism is made not only possible, but necessary; the two protagonists must expose the rawest versions of themselves in order to reach the reading world and to demonstrate that Modernism’s two most distinctive characteristics are not coincidental, but codependent.

Works Cited

- Cervo, Nathan A. "Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'." *Explicator* 60.4 (Summer 2002). 207-9. EBSCO. Web. 11 November 2014.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 9th ed. Vol. 2. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2012. 2524-27.
- Joyce, James. "The Dead." *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 9th ed. Vol. 2. Gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2012. 2282-2311.
- Latham, Sean. "A Portrait of the Snob: James Joyce and the Anxieties of Cultural Capital." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 47.4 (2001) 774-99. *Project Muse*. Web. 11 November 2014.
- Morrissey, L. J. "Inner and Outer Perceptions in Joyce's 'The Dead'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 25.1 (Winter 1988) 25-29. EBSCO. Web. 11 November 2014.
- O'Gorman, Francis. "Modernism, T. S. Eliot, and the 'age of worry'." *Textual Practice* 26.6 (2012) 1001-19. EBSCO. Web. 11 November 2014.